DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 482 CG 022 805

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TITLE Visual Ethnic Identification.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Psychological Association (26th, Oklahoma City, OK, April 10-12, 1980).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anglo Americans; Black Students; College Students; Comparative Analysis; *Ethnic Stereotypes; Higher Education; Mexican Americans; *Physical Characteristics; Race; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Differences; Racial Factors; *Racial Identification; *Visual Discrimination; White Students

ABSTRACT

Volunteers (N=83) from paired classes, including Mexican Americans, Anglo Americans, Black Americans and others, visually classified one another in regard to ethnic identity, in an attempt to assess the accuracy of visual identification when used by researchers to achieve such classification. Findings were that major ethnic groups were quite accurate in identifying Anglo and Black Americans, but all respondents erred twice as much in classifying Mexican Americans. Subjects self-labeled as Other were often misclassified by all respondents, and they were also less accurate in classifying the stimulus person. The conclusion was drawn that visual determination of ethnicity should probably be used only when no other means is available. (Author/TE)

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ED234482

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Texas A & I University

Paper presented at the Southwest Psychological Association

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

April 11, 1980

CG022805

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Visual Ethnic Identification

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Abstract: Volunteers from paired classes visually classified one another in regard to ethnic identity. Accuracy of visual identification used by researchers to achieve such classification was assessed. Findings were that major ethnic groups were quite accurate in identifying Anglos and Blacks, but all respondents erred twice as much in classifying Mexican Americans. Subjects self-labeled as Other were often mis-classified by all respondents, and they were also less accurate in classifying the stimulus person. We concluded that visual determination of ethnicity should probably be used only when no other means is available.

There are some legitimate reasons for classifying people according to their ethnic origin. Demographers, political scientists, government and school officials, and others employ various means for such classifications. Many researchers employ multiple criteria to determine ethnic membership, such as the primary language spoken in the home, self-labeling, and so on. Occasionally, however, with field research, such cross-checks are not available and visual identification has been the sole criterion for determining ethnic identity (e.g., Herndon & Davis, 1976; Knox & Inkster, 1968; Perrine & Westman, 1954). Our purpose was to investigate the accuracy of such a procedure.

Sometimes in natural field studies a researcher has only a brief time to observe each subject in the study and no opportunity to ask questions. Under these conditions, if ethnic identity is considered a salient factor in the behavior being observed, a rapid judgment must be made concerning the potential subject's heritage. Our problem was to determine the degree of

accuracy with which people can judge correctly the ethnic membership of strangers by using only minimal visual cues.

Because most researchers are probably no more highly skilled in such a task than is the average person, and because most research assistants in the field are students, we chose students from our classes as our subject pool. To assess the accuracy with which people can make a snap judgment about the ethnic membership of a stanger, we used students from two college psychology courses that regularly met classes at the same time as two other psychology courses. In other words, two classes were paired with two other classes.

Care was taken to insure that student participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Of the 85 students who attended one of the four classes on the day of the study, 83 volunteered to participate as both "stimulus persons" and "judges." In addition, all students completed a short, one-page "information form" in which they indicated their age, sex, citizenship, an "official" ethnic classification, the primary language spoken in the home, and their preferred expression for indicating ethnic membership. A consent form was also included on the questionnaire. Provision was made for class members to decline participation, if they chose, and without calling class attention to their non-participation.

After students had completed the information form the subjects in one class were randomly assigned to be "stimulus persons" while subjects in the other, paired, class were designated "judges." The subjects assigned first to be "stimuls

persons" were read instructions. They then formed a line outside the door of the other classroom. The "stimulus person" at the head of the line handed a monitor--one of the researchers--her or his completed form. At a signal from the second monitor/ researcher, the subject walked approximately five steps into the room and stood quietly for about five seconds. The second monitor verbally assigned to the "stimulus person," and to each succeeding person from that class, a number corresponding to the "judges'" answer sheets, while she/he stood in the room.

Instructions were also read to the "judges" in the paired class. Their task was to classify each stimulus person according to the same "official" classificaiton system used in the just completed questionnaire. Respondents were told to use visual determination only, and to "X" any subject known to them from other contacts.

Of the 83 students who volunteered to participate in the study, 45 classified themselves as Mexican Americans, 25 as Anglo Americans, 7 as Black Americans, and 6 as Foreign or Other. Interestingly, of the Mexicaqn Americans who stated a personal preference, an overwhelming majority said that they preferred to be called Mexican Americans. No one stated a preference for "Chicano" or "Chicana."

The size of classes, which determined the number of students assigning ethnic classification to any one individual, ranged from 14 to 26, resulting in a total of 1567 possible classifications. This total was reduced by 78 instances in which a stimulus person was known to a respondent. The following error

rates (Table 1) are derived from 1489 ethnic classifications based solely on brief visual exposure by the 83 volunteer respondents.

Table 1

Error Percent Respondents Attempting Visual Ethnic Identification

Stimulus Persons	Judges (Respondents)				
	N	%Anglo	%Black	%Mex.Am.	%Other
Anglo	25	11.2	12.2	11.8	27.0
Black	7	8.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Mex.Am.	45	19.2	14.7	21.7	20.7
Other	6	86.8	85.7	90.7	33.3

The first and most dramatic result was a tremendous, though not surprising, error rate in recognizing foreign persons as such. The 25 Anglo subjects made 33 errors in 38 such determinations--an error rate of 86.8%; 7 Blacks erred by 85.7% 45 Mexican Americans by90.7%, and the 6 others by 33.3%. Also not surprisingly, the few Black "stimulus persons" were classified without error, except for 3 errors by Anglo subjects. These numbers are, of course, too small for conclusive findings.

Our primary interest was in assessing the accuracy of visual ethnic classification of Anglo Americns and Mexican Americans, who comprised 30% and 54% of our respondents, respectively, and a

similarly large proportion of the region of interest. Results were that Anglos recognized Anglos with an 11.2% error rate, and Mexican Americans with a 19.2% error. Mexican Americans erred 11.8% in classifying Anglos, and 21.7% in recognizing fellow Mexican Americans. Overall, Anglos and Mexican Americans as judges did not differ in accuracy--11.2% and 11.8% error in judging Anglos, 19.2% and 21.7% error rates in classifying Mexican Americans. From these percentages it is apparent that both Anglos and Mexican Americans erred twice as often in classifying Mexican Americans as in classifying Anglos.

These findings, as far as we know, represent the initial attempt to assess, empirically, the accuracy of a field research techniquethat has occasionally been employed. We believe the results speak for themselves. To us they say that visual determination of ethnic classification should be used only when no other means is available; if one must rely solely on visual ethnic identificaiton, she or he should be aware of a probably 10 to 20 percent error rate.

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March 21,1991